

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 861

SP 030 226

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TITLE Educational Practitioners: Absent Voices in the Building of Educational Theory.
INSTITUTION Wellesley Coll., Mass. Center for Research on Women.
PUB DATE 87
NOTE 39p.; Paper presented at the Conference on Research and Women in Education (12th, Washington, DC, November 1986).
AVAILABLE FROM Wellesley College Center for Research on Women, Wellesley, MA 02181 (\$3.50).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Action Research; Case Studies; *Classroom Research; Elementary Education; *Instructional Improvement; Teacher Improvement; *Teacher Participation; *Theory Practice Relationship

ABSTRACT

A discussion is presented on the lack of fit between educational research and educational practice. It is pointed out that traditional research is likely to be particularly inaccessible to female practitioners who may feel more alienated by and excluded from the world of research than their male colleagues. Teachers need to participate actively in research in a way which is individually meaningful and which enhances rather than interferes with their primary activity, classroom teaching. A description is given of the work of the Educators' Forum, a seminar designed to stimulate and support practitioner research. The Forum encourages teachers to participate in practitioner research, through which they learn to take seriously and articulate what they know and to discover ways to find out what they don't know. The seminar supports sustained professional dialogue based on the teachers' own knowledge of their educational practice. The research agenda consists of their own individual concerns. This effective participation in educational research is demonstrated by case studies reported by three elementary teachers who conducted research in their classrooms. (JD)

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EDUCATIONAL PRACTITIONERS:

ABSENT VOICES IN THE BUILDING OF EDUCATIONAL THEORY

Claryce L. Evans and Margaret L. Stubbs
Phyllis Frechette*, Claire Neely*, Joan Warner*

PURPOSE

Current critiques of American schooling include an acknowledgement of the failure of educational research to fulfill its potential to improve practice. We believe this failure is due, in part, to the absence of an appropriate role for practitioners within educational research, and that the problem is compounded by the fact that most elementary and secondary teachers are women. Educational research projects too rarely take into account either the central role that teachers must take in educational improvement or the value of practitioners as a source of knowledge about education. In this paper, we comment first on our understanding of the lack of fit between educational research and educational practice. Next, we describe the Educators' Forum, a seminar designed to stimulate and support what we have termed practitioner research (Evans, Stubbs, Duckworth, & Davis, 1981). Then, three teachers describe their studies. We demonstrate that with appropriate stimulation, technical support, and encouragement, teachers do affirm the value of their own insights and participate effectively in educational research. In addition, we argue that participation

*Teacher researchers, whose individual contributions are noted within the body of the paper.

both in generating and conducting educational research and in evaluating and using the research of others can lead teachers to improve their practice and to develop a new vision of their role within the profession so that they come to see themselves as able to contribute to the improvement of educational practice more broadly.

BACKGROUND

To date, practitioners have rarely been involved in educational research except as informants or subjects for the research projects of others. This is, in part, because research has been defined as quite different and separate from practice, and, in part, because practical knowledge has been devalued.

Though they often work in the same arena, researchers and practitioners have learned to go about their work in quite different ways. Traditionally, research has been defined and carried out by researchers. They ask questions based on previous research and expect that the answers to their questions will inform a more general theory which is being articulated gradually, over time. They often use experimental methodologies designed exclusively by researchers. These methodologies include the collection of quantifiable data which are subjected to statistical analyses. The methodologies assume that context-free variables exist, that information can be transferred across contexts, and that findings can be generalized. Researchers

usually find group trends more interesting than individual differences.

Practitioners are not often interested in generalizations and theory. They are more concerned with particular cases, with an unusual student, for example, and with finding immediate solutions to the apparently unrelated sets of everyday problems which present themselves in the classrooms.

These divergent ways of working can serve to separate practitioners and researchers from one another. We should not be surprised to find that each, guided by a different set of priorities, feels diverted from her primary task by the other. This separation is exacerbated when practitioners are asked to manage logistical details or supply data for a research project but are not given an opportunity to understand the underlying question or how it relates to the broader research agenda.

We are concerned, as well, that practitioners are disassociated from research; they are not aware of their insights and so do not know that their insights could be of value to others. Teachers do not usually articulate or write what they know for themselves, or publish for their peers. Our informal survey of substantive articles in twenty-nine educational journals and magazines found in the professional library of a local suburban school system revealed that only twelve percent of the contributors were practicing classroom teachers.

Nor are practitioners encouraged to participate in sustained professional dialogue. There are too few occasions for teachers

to share with each other and/or make public their deeper understandings of their own work. The lack of a sufficient number of forums in which teachers carry on in-depth conversations over long periods of time perpetuates the view that teachers' knowledge has little to contribute to further understanding in the field. Teachers, who most frequently experience their peers either in informal settings or in staff development programs in which their usual role is audience, have few opportunities to see the more reflective, knowledgeable side of their colleagues. They conclude, reasonably but erroneously, that teachers as a group are not very impressive and have little to contribute to the formation of educational theory or the solution of educational problems. They don't talk seriously to each other and so they don't take themselves seriously as a group. They don't talk seriously to each other because they don't take themselves seriously as a group.

When teachers are not engaged in such discussions, their questions about their practice are also not clarified and their importance weighed. Their questions remain unarticulated, unevaluated, and unaddressed. It is difficult for others to become aware of what teachers know, or are concerned about, or have as questions. As a result, the profession does not work on the most significant issues -- those which grow out of teachers' practical knowledge and are most likely to influence school practice. A collective body of knowledge based on teachers' individual contributions and questions can not be developed.

Teachers' central role in the profession remains unacknowledged.

Instead, educational researchers, who are often several steps removed from classroom practice, discuss, define, and evaluate educational practice and theory. Too often, they proceed as though their findings can bypass the thoughtful consideration of teachers. Even those researchers whose main interest is the improvement of practice do not often consider teachers the primary source or audience for their work. They proceed as though useful questions are self-evident and easily generalizable and as though some intermediary can judge their findings and make decisions of which teachers can then be apprised. The assumption is that it is efficient to seek answers which can be applied in any setting and that teachers can act on the basis of information schematically conveyed to them, without an opportunity to make it a part of their personal knowledge and relate it to their central concerns.

Administrators, consultants, curriculum developers and staff developers are too often willing to cooperate in this enterprise -- delivering to teachers answers to questions posed by others or solutions to problems similarly defined. They develop kits, run workshops, and teach teachers new techniques or require them to use particular materials or teaching strategies based on uniform answers to global questions. They frequently impose on all schools and classrooms within their domain a solution to a problem without sufficient investigation to determine whether the problem exists and is a high priority in each classroom and

whether the solution takes into account the particular circumstances of each classroom. In addition, the imposed answer to an unasked question may be delivered in such a way that it is unrelated to the personal knowledge of the teacher and leaves still unasked those questions of concern to the teacher.

Teachers, too, are often willing to let this happen. They are often willing to follow an intermediary's judgment rather than take the responsibility and risk to make their own informed judgments. They may embrace new practices indiscriminately, without consideration of the implicit assumptions and theories, simply because the practices have commanded popular attention. Often they do not have or take the time and resources to critique the research base for the solutions imposed on their schools and classrooms. Other teachers pay no attention to research even in those areas in which that attention would be rewarded, often because they are ill at ease with research and because it has not been written for their consideration. Neither response allows teachers to play the role they could in improving education by contributing to educational research and relating research to practice.

Researchers ignore teachers; teachers ignore researchers right back. The result is the lack of fit between research and practice and the lack of improved practice based on research.

This problem is compounded by the fact that most elementary and secondary teachers are women. Women have been particularly susceptible to being overwhelmed by traditional research. Their

socially conditioned discomfort with mathematics and statistics is well documented (Becker, 1981; Fennema, 1981; Leder, 1980). It has been further noted that the language of research reporting, which is authoritative, formal and distant, using passives and subjunctives, can itself be alienating to women (Keller, 1985). Traditional research is likely, then, to be particularly inaccessible to female practitioners who may feel more alienated by and excluded from the world of research than their male colleagues. The gap between research and practice may be more difficult to close than we originally thought it to be.

We believe that the separation of those who teach from those who study teaching could be diminished by initiatives from either group. Researchers could provide opportunities for those whom they ask for help in conducting their research to understand their goals. They could involve teachers in discussions of research design and rationale. By doing so they would help teachers articulate what they know, would increase teachers' interest in research, and would afford themselves access to information with potential to enhance their studies. In addition, researchers could write research reports for practitioners. Such reports would demystify the terminology of experimental methodologies and would include detailed descriptions of contexts when discussing possible applications.

Practitioners, for their part, also could take initiatives to reduce the separation between practice and research. Taking another college or continuing education course in research

methods is clearly not a comprehensive answer to practitioners' difficulty with traditional research. Whether female or male, teachers are not likely to find taking such a course an effective way to grow professionally. Teachers need to participate actively in research in a way which is individually meaningful and which enhances rather than interferes with their primary activity, classroom teaching.

In our work we encourage teachers to participate in practitioner research, through which they learn to take seriously and articulate what they know and to discover ways to find out what they don't know. Our seminar supports sustained professional dialogue based on the teachers' own knowledge of their educational practice. The research agenda consists of their own individual concerns.

METHOD

The Educators' Forum, now in its third year, is a group of teachers who meet for two hours every other week during the school year to design, carry out, and interpret classroom investigations. The teachers attend voluntarily and are neither paid a stipend nor charged a fee for participation. Last spring the Forum became affiliated with the Harvard Teachers' Network, which provides meeting space and assistance in documenting the sessions. There is currently no other funding supporting our activities.

The immediate purpose of the Forum is to provide an opportunity for participating teachers to understand their own work better. Group meetings are designed so that each person is helped to identify an area of sufficient interest to merit her sustained attention, recognize and value what she already knows in relation to it, state her implicit knowledge explicitly and coherently, identify other information which is likely to be useful or interesting, find ways to gather that information and, later, make sense of the new information and the new perceptions and ideas which develop from it.

Our goal is that each individual will gradually take responsibility for these tasks and that the participants will form a mutually supportive group to assist each member in her work.

The Forum meetings provide the structure to support the participating teachers as they think through their investigations. Periodically, participants present their work to the group for discussion, usually three or four teachers reporting at each meeting. In response to these presentations, the other members serve as advisors, asking questions to help the teacher clarify her thinking and define and take the next step in the investigation. The participants are also encouraged to write for themselves and the group in order to enhance their own understanding of their questions.

Conducting classroom investigations is difficult work for teachers. They do not do it quickly or without thought and

effort. Selecting a topic, for example, is not usually done in a single session. Teachers are bombarded with many ideas, interests, problems, and dilemmas in relation to their classrooms. To isolate just one of the many questions and puzzles for concentrated study is not a simple task. Similarly, deciding on the essential question, separating it from the confusion and muddle and related subquestions, and identifying which information is likely to be useful requires time and thought. This can be difficult for an educational researcher who does it as part of his/her job, it is even more difficult at the end of a day of teaching young students.

To begin her work, each teacher is encouraged to identify something in her classroom about which she would like to know more. She begins, therefore, with a question related to her own practice and usually seeks answers in her own classroom. She does not start with a theoretical question and does not study other teachers' practices. Because her question is something she cares about, and because it is about her own work, she may feel she takes a risk in discussing it in depth in a group. This work can be, therefore, quite personal.

In order to develop an atmosphere in which teachers can do difficult and risky work, in which discussions are focused, productive, and safe, a structure for discussion has been established and a set of clarifying questions has evolved.

Though the first set of guidelines were developed before the teachers met, they are periodically discussed and revised by the group. Here is the current revision.

1) We seek to help each other obtain more information about our own classrooms, to better understand our classrooms. We do not attempt to suggest better teaching strategies.

2) When a teacher presents her work for discussion, we respond to her by trying to see the questions and issues from her point of view, and by helping her figure out what she wants to understand, not what we find most interesting or important.

Deliberately missing from the Forum, in sharp contrast with most seminars for teachers, is direct assistance for improving practice. We take the position that there is no one best or most enlightened view of teaching to which all members need be committed. We acknowledge that people work in quite different settings and have quite different views of teaching and learning. There is, therefore, no attempt to convince the teachers that they should use different teaching strategies or to teach them how to do so. The teachers are, in fact, discouraged from doing this for one another. One reason for this exclusion is that direct assistance for improving practice is regularly available at colleges and universities, inservice programs, and conferences. The opportunity to analyze one's own practice is not. A more important reason is that such discussions detract from and are inconsistent with the more basic effort of the Forum, to provide a place for a teacher to structure what she knows, clarify her confusions, answer the questions she thinks are important, and find new questions to ask. The implicit

message of advice giving is that someone else knows. The intended message of the Forum is that teachers are knowledgeable experts.

3) We try to learn something, to answer some questions about our classrooms. In other words, we are task oriented.

4) Each participant is asked to avoid extended discussions of issues or problems over which she has no control or influence.

5) Written notes of each session are regularly distributed to all participants and tape recordings made of each session are available to any participant on request.

The written notes and the availability of the tapes permit a teacher to present her work for discussion and concentrate on the ideas without stopping to write her own notes. The notes also provide the opportunity for members and the discussion leader to look back over what we have done. When funding becomes available, we plan to use the notes and recordings to document and analyze more thoroughly the work of the Forum.

6) Because teaching is personal and members of the group talk about some issues which are worrisome, discussions of the group and documents prepared in connection with it are confidential.

7) The "subjects" of the investigations are recognized as people too; they are respected and not treated as objects.

8) Each participant has "air time" on a regular basis.

At any meeting, a teacher may schedule time to present her work at a future meeting. In addition, we work to include all members and to avoid having a small number of people dominate the discussions.

After a teacher has decided on a topic, the group assists her in defining a clear question that can be investigated.

Again, a structure often helps to keep the discussion from wandering to interesting tangential issues. In order to keep the discussion focused, we might begin by asking the presenting teacher some of the following questions.

- 1) What would you like to know about your classroom?
- 2) What is it about this question/issue which makes it important/interesting to you?
- 3) What do you mean by "responsible" (for example)? Can you think of a time when one of your students was "responsible"? Can you think of a time when someone was not "responsible"?
- 4) What do you already know (about this question)?
- 5) What is still puzzling to you?
- 6) What other information would be useful/interesting?
- 7) What are some ways you might be able to find out?
- 8) What do you think might be a reasonable next step?

Other questions, directly related to the teacher's concern would also be asked.

INVESTIGATIONS

About Joshua, Teaching, and Research

Phyllis Frechette

(a third grade teacher in a suburban public school)

As a newcomer to the Educators' Forum, I was confused about how to proceed. I was afraid that something grandiose was expected. Nothing spectacular was occurring to me, so I began simply by sharing my journal notes about Joshua (a pseudonym), one of my third graders. I remember that I felt a little apologetic about their "commonness" and promised to do better the next time because, as I explained to the group, I didn't intend to focus on Joshua for the whole year. Certainly, I underestimated the importance of what I was witnessing and sharing; and I did not recognize myself as "doing research."

I began by listing behaviors of Joshua's that were particularly troublesome to me. Among these were his constant movement, nose-picking, itching, frequent and audible mouth noises, and an unkempt appearance. By observing this child closely, I was hoping to identify some of his positive aspects so I might focus on these, rather than reinforce his negative behavior. I hoped that we might both become more comfortable in the classroom.

Some of my initial notes included the following:

-- Josh is tall, good-looking, with dark hair and eyes. He is an excellent reader and has a very good mind for math (one of two children who got all examples correct in a math inventory), although his paper work in both reading and math is carelessly done with many errors.

-- Josh's inappropriate noises are often at the expense of others who are trying to share a conversation or to answer a question -- peers and adults alike.

-- A conference with Josh's parents was not as helpful as I had hoped. They were concerned, though, that he work up to his potential. They feel his potential is very high. Josh is left-handed and he experiences some small motor difficulty which is especially evident when he is writing. Josh's parents wondered if there were techniques or exercises that could help his small motor development. We decided to request an evaluation of his fine motor functioning.

-- I am more concerned about Joshua's problems conforming in the classroom and relating to his peers. I see his behavior problems as interfering with his learning.

When I brought my concerns to the Educators' Forum, I explained that my classroom was a self-contained third grade, that this particular class came with a reputation for being difficult, and that, in fact, I found the children, individually, to be charming, intelligent, capable, and challenging, including Joshua. I wondered, though, how Josh in particular could be challenged so that his activity was more appropriately channeled.

A significant turning point for me came when I had a chance to hear each member of the group, in turn, respond to what she had heard me say about Joshua. The members of the Forum had many questions for me to consider: had I taken him to "team" (an in-house evaluation group)? did others' observations of him confirm what I was seeing? were there any surprises in their observations? I reflected on all the issues that were raised and found that, in addition to the questions about Josh, I had some questions about myself as an investigator. Some of my questions, also acknowledged by a group of educators whose work has been published by the North Dakota Study Group on Evaluation (Barritt, Beekman, Bleeker, & Mulderij, 1985), included: what were my pre-judgments? what personal commitments was I bringing to my study? This self-questioning, and the questions raised by the Forum members, forced me to evaluate my own perceptions, and caused me to view the subject with a fresh outlook.

Forum members suggested that another's detailed view of the situation might be helpful. Another teacher, observing in my classroom, made detailed notes of Josh's activities in the classroom. The notes from her observation and my discussion with her confirmed much that I had already observed myself. She too saw Josh lying on the floor, feet against the wall, legs bouncing up and down; she saw him rubbing his nose, blowing his nose, rolling pencils, running in the room, rocking on his chair; and she heard his frequent coughing and burping.

To my interest, she also noted that Josh's mouth noises were inversely related to my physical closeness -- the farther away I was, the noisier he was. This observation led me to wonder how much of the random movement and noisiness he was already controlling for my benefit, for it was now clear that he had been exerting some measure of control. Now that I was aware of a pattern, I asked myself what I could do to interrupt it. Might I be able to ignore more of what he wasn't able to control?

I wanted to know more about when Josh's extraneous noises and movement interfered with his learning and with his interactions with the other children. Were the children seated near him as distracted as I was? To find out, I began to observe the other children. I was particularly interested in times when his peers either accepted or rejected his presence, and how he responded to that. I was surprised when I began watching to learn that he had very little contact with other children. I found that he did an "alongside" type of play, sitting alone at his desk. At snack time, he ate near others, watching them. He was not really with them.

I found that my increased concentration on Joshua strengthened my resolve to continue to follow his progress. The more I watched, the more I saw, the more I wanted to see. I could not put the topic to rest. At some point I realized that, indeed, I did intend to focus on Joshua for the entire year, in spite of the number of times I denied that to members of the

Forum. By keeping my journal, and remaining open to his responses, I discovered avenues of change in my approach to him.

Another helpful piece of new information to emerge from all this careful looking was that Joshua responded enthusiastically in music class. In music, Josh's movement, less inhibited, was often rendered more appropriate. When he did not clap or move in time to the music, he was encouraged to try again. His correct answers were not accepted when he shouted them out, but he knew he was right; and because he wanted to be recognized, he played by the rules in music class and learned there to raise his hand to get positive reinforcement. He bloomed when he overheard the music teacher refer to him as "a most cooperative member of the class, a marvelous actor, and very creative." This new-to-me information gave me more ideas about what I could do in my classroom. I decided to make a point of letting Josh know when his behaviors were appropriate, to try to ignore more of his distracting behavior, and to insist, as the music teacher had, that Josh conform to certain basic rules of classroom discipline.

It worked. One small success occurred when I read him a story after he had asked me to do so. He seemed to enjoy this activity thoroughly, although he corrected my interpretation as I read. After we finished, he asked me if he could write a story on his own, and did so quite successfully. Knowing more now, as a result of all my thinking and observing, I realized that when Joshua selected an activity he accomplished it, even though it might take a long time. I was confident about supporting his

choices now, having realized that when I initiated something as a "great idea" for him to do the response from him was more likely to be negative, and the work was less likely to be completed.

The most important thing I learned from the experience of studying one child was how to pursue a subject, to stay with it, to trust my own judgment, to be patient, to learn to notice subtle, positive changes in a child's behavior, and to use these changes to the child's and my own advantage in the classroom.

I felt particularly rewarded for my study during the end-of-the-year concert. The third grade children presented a program of songs, recorder music, and accompaniment on Orff instruments for the enjoyment of the entire school. I looked at Joshua. He was wearing a neat pair of corduroy slacks and a pull-over shirt that had not been chewed at the neck, as so many of his shirts had been at the beginning of the year. His arms came through the sleeves where arms should be. He was to play a few notes on the xylophone at the end of a selection. His arms and his hands moved constantly as he waited -- in time to the music; his head moved in big, expressive circles; and with his eyes and chin he gave a signal to the musicians as to when they should come in (even though they paid no attention to him because they were following the lead of the music teacher). And at exactly the right moment he played exactly the right bars at exactly the right beat. My thoughts were of movement in September -- random, distracting, non-focused and subconscious. Sometimes, it's still that way. But what I could see now, in

addition, was controlled and purposeful movement by a child who was clearly enjoying himself, caught up in the joy of the moment, and making a positive and appropriate contribution to the group experience. My thoughts were immediately scriptural -- "Make a joyful noise unto the Lord" described the children and, as for myself, "My cup runneth over!"

Reference

Barritt, L., Beekman, T., Bleeker, H., & Mulderij, K. (1985). Researching educational practice. Grand Forks, ND: University of North Dakota Press.

An Idea Which Interested Me

Claire Neely

(a first/second grade teacher in a small, independent school)

Last fall I read an article in Learning magazine (Armstrong, 1985) which intrigued me. It talked about describing learning disabled children by their strengths and traits rather than by their deficits. There was a child in my classroom of twenty-three first and second graders who was new to the school and looked as though she was going to need a particular approach which I wanted to determine as soon as possible. I chose to write about my observations of her for the Educators' Forum. I concentrated on describing Christine (a pseudonym) both in skills groups and in her general conduct in the classroom. There were inconsistencies in her abilities which I needed to keep track of because they puzzled me. For example, she seemed to have a wavering focus: sometimes she knew other children's names and other times she didn't. She did not fit neatly into skills groups, and she required a good deal of individual instruction in early math skills and pre-reading activities. I felt that I could manage to write about her regularly and that by writing I could increase my awareness of how she could best learn. I also looked at how I interacted with her, reflecting on how my expectations and responses to her affected her in the context of

the classroom. I was at a place in my practice in which I wanted to refine my approach to children with different learning styles, and I had good models in our school's learning specialist and my co-teacher, who was quite experienced in Special Education.

The more I wrote about Christine, the more appropriate it seemed to choose one child as a focus for a journal. Once I got into the habit of writing down my thoughts about her, I found that I watched and listened to her more carefully, and that this had a positive effect on my teaching. I could recall a good bit of what went on with her during a week, and I became more conscious of how my co-teacher and I adapted things to insure that she got regular practice and stimulation in the program. In writing for the Educators' Forum and myself, I could go beyond the descriptive reports I wrote for school purposes. I could raise questions or notice and follow themes and patterns as they emerged. Other teachers in the Forum read what I wrote, responded with good questions, and helped me look at what I was finding out by writing.

In addition to looking at her academic skills, I watched Christine socially. I noticed how she interacted with other children, and I found out what parts of the school day were most important to her. I noticed that meeting times were difficult for her, and that games, fantasy play, and making things were good vehicles for her very expressive personality. I compared notes with her other teachers in order to decide what she needed. In the process of writing about this one child, I found myself

more assured in dealing with her, more trusting of my judgment as a teacher, and better able to step back and observe in the learning situation. As a result of this research, I also identified Christine's strengths and specific weaknesses, which led to changes in my approach to her. I found that she had strong social skills, such as being very open to other children even when they were moody. She also provided enthusiasm in small group work when she made discoveries or found ways to use materials that interested other children. At choice times, she often engaged other children by making things with art and scrap materials. She helped sustain group fantasy play, such as pretend stores under the loft, by having ideas and supporting the ideas of others. She made the room her own, putting signs she had written or pictures she had drawn on the walls.

As she was struggling with beginning to read and write, Christine regressed occasionally. I was aware of becoming more sensitive in the way I spoke to her and the pace I set for her. After Thanksgiving, we put her on a schedule for each morning, and she found the individual schedule quite helpful. She could finish the mornings feeling she had fulfilled her requirements. And there were breaks built in so that she could play and make things. Writing about her helped me come to the realization that she would benefit from having more time to learn. By Christmas we had decided to have her take an extra year in Lower School, to which her mother agreed readily. This decision was easier to

make because of the observations and reflections I had been writing down about her.

By looking closely at Christine, I examined my teaching too. Much of my teaching style would have served this child, but some things needed to be tailored to allow her strengths to emerge and be recognized while she was working on the things that were difficult for her. I became more allowing and more patient with her and with myself. I consciously made room for her to express herself, and I stepped back from the temptation to be her champion. Often when I finished writing about her I would think about what I wanted to try with her next, and what I wanted to watch. It became an exciting interaction between practice and reflection. I shared some of the writing with other people who worked with Christine at school, and they have given me some interesting feedback. Having the discipline of bringing writing to the other teachers in the Educators' Forum was a very necessary part of the process for me. I was writing for myself, but I had to be precise and honest for the peers who would read it. Their questions helped to sharpen and direct my thinking.

Writing about one child has its limitations, but it also provided me with a way of looking that was, as far as possible, non-judgmental and non-comparative. It had a concrete and manageable quality which made it fun to sit down and write. And the time I spent looking at Christine definitely carried over into my work with other children. It affected my practice positively. By writing about her strengths I was able to find

ways to build on them. By examining my interactions with her I found some patience and specific receptivity to what children bring with them to a learning situation. I have often said that I did not really know what I thought until I wrote it down. I found that writing regularly helped me to value my ideas and to trust my intuition. It helped combat the feeling that the day's experiences drained away unnoticed. Sharing the writing with other teachers reinforced the notion that we have common goals and standards even in very different settings. Writing has grounded me, in that, while it is inspiring, it is also a way of being realistic. My close observation of Christine helped me to become more realistic about my expectations of her, and this affected my goals for myself in relation to her learning.

Reference

Armstrong, T. (1985). How real are learning disabilities? Learning, 14 (2).

Work in Progress

Joan Warner

(a third grade teacher in a suburban public school)

I have been an educator for more than thirty years. I have known generations of children in many different settings. Over the last several years, I have had increasing concern about children who have behavior problems in my classroom. It seems to me that with the changes in society -- for example, the number of single-parent families and the number of families in which both parents work -- I see an increase in the number of children who have difficulties in school. My low success rate in dealing with such children has motivated me to see if I can find a more effective way of helping in these cases.

In the past when problems became apparent, it was my practice to phone the parents and set up a conference. In other words, only after a problem presented itself did I call the parents. Parents who were called had varying reactions. Some parents were relieved; they had been having similar problems at home and were anxious to work on ways to diminish the difficult behavior. Our school system has an excellent referral system for such problems. If either parent or teacher believes that a child's problems need further evaluation, a team is ready to do psychological and other testing. Then, if services are deemed needed, there is a range of people -- potentially including a psychologist, a resource room teacher, a school social worker, an

occupational therapist, and a speech teacher -- who can offer help. However, because such referrals are documented in a child's permanent record, some parents prefer to get private therapy at their own expense in order to avoid any record of the child's difficulty. Usually when a referral is made, parents and I cooperate with the therapist and the problem behavior is diminished.

Other parents whom I called had a more negative reaction. Some refused to admit that their child had a problem, except at school. A few parents claimed that the behavior must be triggered by other children in the class. Some parents felt that I was not handling the problem correctly. In such cases, finding a solution became nearly impossible. Some parents resolved this dilemma by having their child transferred to another class, or by transferring the child to a private school. In most cases, as far as I could determine, this action did not eliminate the problem behavior; the behavior was merely relocated to a different setting. Even though the problem was removed from my jurisdiction, I never felt good about such resolutions; in fact, when this would occur, I felt that I had not done enough, or that I was somehow a failure because I couldn't be more helpful. When the child remained in my class, and the behavior continued in spite of all my efforts to redirect the child's energy, there were times when I would think that it was all the parents' fault and feel that if only they had done their job better, then my job would not be so difficult. Neither of these ways of thinking was

productive. Placing blame on either myself or the parents did not help to find a solution.

As I began to reflect and write about these problems, I began to see that I was not going anywhere with my thinking. I was going around in the same track: it was either my fault or the parents' fault. Then last year, I had two experiences which made me feel that a particular type of parent-teacher communication would be helpful to me in my effort to deal with children when behavior problems emerge.

The first situation involved a child who had terrible tantrums, which included tearing up papers, crying, and saying things like, "I'm no good, I can't do anything," when he met any frustration or failed to meet his own standards for success. In addition, this child would, at other times, interrupt and insist on speaking his mind, whether his comments were relevant or not. His parents were very concerned because he was exhibiting similar behavior at home. When I brought my concern to their attention, they sought the services of a social worker, who was able to work with the parents and me to help us restructure our interactions with the child. However, this intervention did not begin until mid-year.

In the second situation, a child was reacting to teasing by hitting. It wasn't until February that I learned that this child was being taught at home that it was very important for him to defend himself and that, in his mind, being teased was a form of

attack. Again, it was mid-year before I could help this child sort out appropriate behavior for home and school.

When I thought about these experiences later, it occurred to me that, if I had had more information about each of these children earlier in the year, perhaps the parents and I could have been working together, or at least have had a common base of understanding from the beginning of the year. I saw a need to know more about parent-child interactions and other aspects of the child's life outside of school early in the year. I had the sense that knowing more about the child outside of school would help in my understanding of the child's behavior in school.

In an effort to obtain such information, I told parents this fall at the open house that I wanted to improve communication between home and school, and that I would be starting a series of conferences in which I would like them to tell me about their child. The only agenda would be their agenda. I would listen, perhaps ask a question now and then. Actually, the first conference was very open-ended -- I began with, "Tell me about your child." However, I soon realized that most parents found that too open-ended, and so made up the following list of questions which I used to prompt their responses.

Tell me what you like about _____.
Tell me what your concerns are.
Tell me about relationships with siblings.
Tell me about a typical evening, what happens after dinner.
What is bedtime?
What about discipline? What if there is a disagreement about what to do?

What does your child enjoy doing, especially after school?
What hopes, aspirations do you have for _____?

I have been very excited about these conferences and the parents' responses. Each parent or set of parents seemed genuinely pleased to be there and to have the opportunity to talk about his/her child. I am amazed at the amount of information I am getting, both explicit and implicit. Of course, it is enormously helpful to know about home routines, whether Mother works, the kind of interactions that take place in a typical evening. My knowledge about each child is helping my understanding of events at school. And, I am learning other things. For instance, I have noticed that when both parents come some have no difficulty sharing the talking time -- it goes easily back and forth from one to the other. They are comfortable with each other and with talking about their child. Other couples take time to decide who will talk. One mother said to her husband, "You talk about what you like about Susie. I'll talk about our concerns."

In the conferences I tried to be very relaxed and open, and by setting that tone I hoped parents would respond in the same manner. Most of them did, and there was comfortable, easy conversation, with occasional laughter. For example, in responding to how they handle a disagreement between parent and child, one Mom said cheerfully, "I yell!" Some parents seemed more nervous; some weren't sure how to answer; and some were searching for responses to some questions, almost as if they

weren't sure what to say. I have completed almost all the conferences and, with most of them, I feel the communication was excellent and that a good working relationship has been established.

As I reflect on what I have learned, a number of theoretical questions come to mind. What does it mean for a child when Mom has one view of him or her, and Dad has quite a different view? In one case, Mom is quite critical, while Dad thinks the child is wonderful. I wonder how this affects the child's feelings about herself. In a two-child family, what does it mean for the child when Mom feels primary responsibility for one child, and Dad is more responsible for the other? My observation of the child in each of these cases is that s/he is more disorganized, less able to focus on large group instruction, and less able to control behavior during classtime. When parents are clearly unified in their approach to their child, and relaxed about discussing him/her, it seems to me that child is more organized, self-motivated, and task-oriented. In a few cases, parents' perceptions of their children differed from mine. When this was the case, I wondered if the parents were trying to impress me or whether the child really was behaving differently at home. In one case, the parents' concerns about their child were so overwhelming that they never talked about what they liked about him. In this case the communication was so one-sided that I feel I do not know this child as well as I do some of the others. Nor do I feel a sense of partnership with the parents. I feel as

though they were saying, "Here's our 'Johnny.' You fix it."

This case does not fit with my other experiences this fall; it is more like situations I've had in other years.

From holding this round of conferences I learned that each talk with parents was unique. The questions I asked elicited more information from some parents, less from others. Some of the information I wanted was not elicited through any of the questions. For instance, one question which I will add for another time is, "What are your rules for your child?" The question I had included about discipline did not lead to information about what the rules are and what happens when the rules are not followed.

My continued work with the children has led me to some additional questions for the next round of conferences. There seems to be a high degree of nervous energy in many of the children. I need to find out if this is also true at home. Of course, I have specific concerns about individual children such as: Why does _____ work so slowly, and never finish an assignment? Why does _____ tip back in his chair, and turn sideways at his desk? Are parents seeing these distractions in their children? If so, when?

This project is just beginning. What I have now are only preliminary findings. The project will continue all year. Then what? I expect that I will glean some information which will inform my teaching practice, as well as some information about parenting. I've wondered about how I can begin to share my

insights. I've told parents that I'm conducting the conferences in order to establish a partnership with parents so that behavior problems, should they arise, will be dealt with by parents and teacher working together. I'm learning so much and am afraid that I will jeopardize the spontaneity of their responses if parents think at this point that I am doing a "research project." I have run into the classical problem of the practitioner as researcher, in that my practice is more important to me than my research. It is more important to me to safeguard the genuineness of responses from the parents than to continue my research. Yet I feel there is potentially a lot of material to be shared. I feel a real tension about this.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Evidence of some of the positive outcomes of participating in the Forum is found in each of the previous sections. Claire has told us that her practice was positively affected. She writes:

watching and listening to Christine more carefully . . . had a positive effect on my teaching; . . . by looking closely at Christine, I examined my teaching too. . . by writing about Christine, I could increase my awareness of how best she could learn. . . the time I spent looking at Christine carried over into my work with other children.

She also tells us that she's changed the way she thinks about herself:

writing regularly helped me to value my ideas and trust my intuition.

She found a way to articulate what she already knows:

I've often said that I did not really know what I thought until I wrote it down. . . It (writing) helped combat the feeling that the day's experience drained away unnoticed.

Phyllis too refers to changes in practice and changes in self-perception. She writes:

I was discovering new avenues of change in my approach to him. The most important thing I learned from the experience of watching one child was how to pursue a subject, to stay with it, to trust my own judgment, to be patient and to learn to notice subtle, positive changes in a child's behavior, and to use these changes to the child's and my own advantage in the classroom. . . This self-questioning, and the questions raised by the Forum members, forced me to evaluate my own perceptions, and caused me to view the subject with a fresh outlook.

Joan, though not near the completion of her project, feels she is learning new things about her students that will help her in the classroom and may also be of interest to parents. She anticipates that she will glean some information that will inform her teaching practice, as well as some information about parenting, and is wondering how she might share what she expects to learn with others.

The commentaries by teachers on classroom practice make it possible for others to think and learn about the practitioner's perspective. This perspective is important both because it is teachers who are in direct contact with students and because in the majority of America's elementary and secondary classrooms the teachers are woman. We are convinced that as teachers' voices become stronger they will contribute to our understanding of the educational process.

Implicit in these descriptions is the expression of each teacher's renewed interest in her classroom. The investigations were energizing; teachers do not view participation in this type of research as "having more work to do." Other teachers in the Forum have reported related benefits -- the Forum provides them with much needed intellectual stimulation and a comraderie that is in sharp contrast with the isolation they experience in their schools.

The teachers' comments affirm our assumption that they have much to gain, both personally and professionally, by practitioner research. Given appropriate support, teachers experience the

value of looking closely at one's classroom over time; of writing as an aid to looking, thinking, and understanding; and of focused discussions with colleagues. We find that more of the members of the Forum write more each year, and are more interested in making their work public. This is evidence that they are becoming more articulate about what they know and are increasingly acknowledging the value of what they know.

The achievements of the teachers represent the first steps toward the accomplishment of the long-range goal of practitioner research: we hope to demonstrate that once teachers' central role in the profession is acknowledged, first by themselves, and then by others, they can and will contribute actively and productively to analyzing and improving practice, both within their own classroom and, more broadly, within the field of education.

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AUTHORS' NOTES

People interested in participating in the Educators' Forum, or in learning more about our work may contact Dr. Claryce Evans, Duxbury Public Schools, Duxbury, MA 02332, phone: 617-934-5601 or Dr. Peggy Stubbs, Center for Research on Women, Wellesley College, Wellesley, MA 02181, phone: 617-431-1453, or leave a message with the Teachers' Network.

The Teachers' Network is located at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (Appian Way, Cambridge, MA, 02138, phone: 617-495-3301). Formed in January 1986, it provides a structure for teachers to come together in a variety of groups to discuss their views of education, schools, and teaching. It is guided by an advisory board of twelve teachers, an administrator, three Harvard faculty members, and three Harvard Graduate School of Education students.

A general discussion of the relationship between theory and practice may be found in Amabile, T.M. & Stubbs, M.L. (Eds.) Psychological research in the classroom: Issues for educators and researchers. Elmsford, NY: Pergamon Press, 1982.